



Working Group on Sex Work and Human Rights

Why This Kit is Necessary

- Sex workers have lived on the margins of society through most of human history. Stereotypes, derogatory names, stigma and general indifference to their humanity prevail worldwide.
- While the exchange of sex for money is a common practice around the world, sex workers are often treated as less than human, both in cultural attitudes and public policy. While the human rights of sex workers are routinely abused in countries around the globe, this information kit focuses on three areas: “demand” for sex work, confusing sex work and trafficking as being the same, and the U.S. administration’s anti-prostitution pledge.
- The materials in this kit seek to replace those attitudes with realism, compassion and sensible policy alternatives. We will try to counter the prejudice, stereotypes and general misinformation that stand in place of accuracy about the circumstances of sex work and the people engaged in it. The rights to life, safety, free speech, political action and access to information and to basic health and education services are as important to sex workers as to anyone else. No one should lose these human rights because of the work they do.

Countering Prejudice With Reality

- The factors that lead people into sex work are obscured by prejudice, moral indignation and general misinformation. Poverty, gender inequality, inadequate education and lack of economically viable job options contribute to the reasons many people enter into sex work, but these conditions are rarely mentioned in the public policy debate on sex work. Instead, arguments that perpetuate harmful myths about the character, motives, needs and morals of sex workers continue to influence policy decisions, to the detriment of sex workers and all of society.
- Sex work is universal and any successful effort to curb the spread of HIV/AIDS must incorporate sex workers. But bias against sex workers often means that instead of being engaged as part of the solution to the HIV/AIDS pandemic, sex workers are treated as part of the problem. They are then punished rather than enlisted to help in HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment programs.
- For example, the U.S. requirement tied to its HIV-prevention and anti-trafficking funding that health care and social service providers denounce prostitution has been used to deny sex workers around the world the health services they need to survive, the safe-sex education that could protect them and their communities from HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections, and the programs such as education and job training that could give them more control over their lives.
- The “anti-prostitution pledge” unfairly vilifies sex workers and also forces organizations that treat vulnerable people to take sides – either to condemn the people who need their help or risk losing the funds that make their crucial work possible.
- Similarly, the conflation of sex work (a commercial exchange of sexual services) with human trafficking (coercion into forced labor of all kinds) harms both the sex workers caught in the confusion and the fight against trafficking.
- We oppose human trafficking in any form. We support confronting the force, deception and coercion inherent in all human trafficking. But policies aimed at assisting trafficked persons must be properly targeted to help them, not to harm sex workers through arrest, harassment, and deportation.

- We remind readers of this kit that sex workers are people with the human rights due to all individuals. Our materials seek to correct false ideas about sex work and sex workers, and to offer alternative policies and approaches to those that currently endanger sex workers' safety and health and contribute to their marginalization.

For More Information:

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